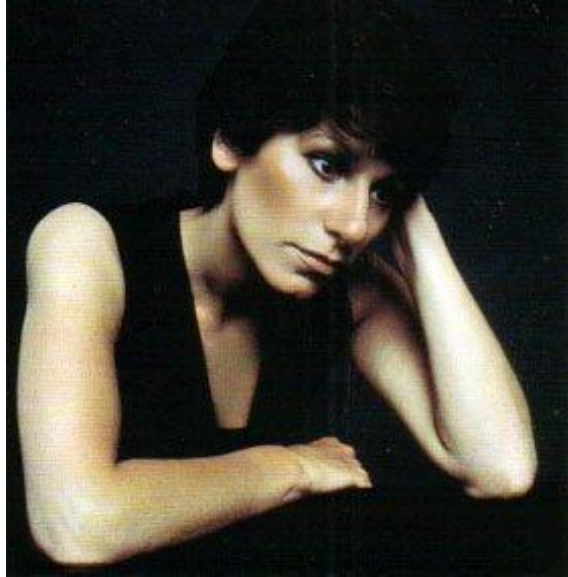


The Stars Sound Like Wind Chimes: Jane Olivor on Life and Music

By Dan Geringer
Philadelphia Daily News Staff Writer
Copyright Philadelphia Daily News 1982



“I am not on cocaine,” Jane Olivor, the Brooklyn Nightingale, says quickly with a smile and a snuffle. “I’m sneezing and I’m talking a little too fast and I might get tired all of a sudden and fall asleep in my soup, but it’s not cocaine. It’s antihistamines.

“They say I have an allergy but I’ve never had an allergy in my whole life, so now, all of a sudden, I’ve got an allergy? This is

ridiculous. But it’s not cocaine. Never had it in my life. What? I’m gonna take a drug that makes you lose weight? Makes you talk a mile a minute? For-get it. Nev-er.”

She is thin, waif-like with luminous blue eyes and brown Peter Pan hair. She is wearing a long, dark skirt and an old-fashioned white blouse with lacy ruffles around the neck. She is the best damn cabaret singer in the country.

Tonight and tomorrow night, she brings her exhilarating, deeply personalized collection of ballads (“Like a merchant in a market of thieves, I come displaying my wares for you...”) gentle rock ‘n roll (“Doo-lang, doo-lang, doo-lang...he’s so fine...”), a little reggae, a little country and a little continental advice on zee affairs of zee heart to Valley Forge Music Fair.

But right now she’s having lunch at Maxwell’s Plum in Manhattan and she’s worried that the allergy quacks are trying to pin the rap for her sniffles on her three-year-old Siamese cat, Duncan.

“Three years ago, I wanted to take care of something,” she explains. “I didn’t want a plant. I didn’t want a child. I didn’t want a turtle. So a friend of mine got me Duncan. This cat is a doll. This cat is a smoothie. I pet him when he eats, I play with his tail, I kiss him, I hold him. He doesn’t hit. He doesn’t bite. He’s a Paul Simon cat. A little spirit walking around the apartment, y’know? I don’t care what the doctor says. Duncan stays.”

A big spirit walking around the stage, Olivor’s earliest musical influence dates back to her Brooklyn girlhood and to memories of her father at the piano. “My father would come home from work and play Rachmaninoff’s ‘Prelude in C-Sharp Minor and I was galvanized. It wasn’t casual. Galvanized. He was passionate about it and then I was because I saw what was going on in him and I had it in me, even as a small child, to know what that was, to be touched by it.

“I’d say, ‘Daddy, play that piece with all the dark notes,’ and he told me the story of what was going on, how the churches and the city were burning down, and, at the end, when the music is very soft, that was the rubble, that was all that was left of the city.

“My mind was ablaze with what was going on in that music. Every time he played it, I used to get chills. I saw the buildings on fire and the people running and the rubble at the end, the ashes. As I’m talking, I’m seeing it all over again. I’m getting the chills even

now. I guess I've always had the ability to see pictures like that and to be moved by them."

Her father, Olivor remembers, used to sing while he played the piano. "My mother used to sing at home, too. The only time there was any harmony in the house was when they were singing together. Other times, it was a circus, a nut house. The glory and the banana peel. A bit much. Very little peace. A lot of screaming and yelling and not agreeing. It was a house on fire.

"But there was a love there, too. It's very hard to describe. The discombobulation of the yelling and the egos fighting all the time and the misunderstandings that were going on and yet there was love..."

Her parents divorced when Olivor was 13. "My mother and I moved to Manhattan with her new husband. The lights went out. My mother became a stranger. My mother had made this decision. She wanted to have a wealthy new life and made her choice between including me in her life or not. She decided not to. Her new husband was a self-centered bore. She stopped talking to me.

"I felt like somebody had cracked the egg open and I fell out. It was like being in a sunny room and then suddenly being locked in a closet. I went from a very happy life in Brooklyn to 34th Street in Manhattan and no one to talk to. I wasn't ready for a doorman. I wasn't ready for a man to open the door for me. I could do it myself. We don't have doormen in Brooklyn.

"See, something about Brooklyn has feelings. Brooklyn has feelings. We lived next to a shul, a synagogue, two-story. And my window faced the shul's backyard, where they used to build a sukkah every year. This old man used to come out of nowhere every year in his scuffed shoes and his dirty pants and he used to up the sukkah, which is a shelter made of branches.

"Well, what I remember is at night, the rabbis used to sit in the sukkah and murmur their prayers. And I would sit by my open window and put my hands under my face and I could see the electric light shimmering through the straw that covered the sukkah and I could hear the rabbis' prayers floating up through the straw.

"And there were apples and pears and bottles of whiskey hanging on the sukkah. And wind chimes. I used to look up at the stars at night, feel the breeze blowing on my face, and listen to the wind chimes. I remember thinking that the stars sounded like wind chimes. I still do. When I'm in the country, I can look up at the stars, and feel the wind, and hear that wind chimes music in the stars.

"And it brings tears to my eyes because you can't get that in Manhattan. It's just a beautiful remembrance that I have of Brooklyn. It's hard to look up at the stars in Manhattan. There are only about six of 'em."

Olivor first sang professionally at New York's Café Levantine in the early 1970s. "Israeli songs. I didn't understand what I was singing but I liked it. It was all phonetical. And I



sang some English songs that would fit in with the feeling there. Like ‘Those Were the Days’ and ‘Delilah.’ Oh God! I sang ‘Delilah.’ Hey, what did I know?”

Her big break came in 1974 when, on her third auditioning try, she was booked at New York’s classiest cabaret, Reno Sweeney. “The first two auditions, I sang three songs. The third audition, they made me do eight. A half hour. I had never done more than 10 minutes before. I sang the whole repertoire of my life. I was a basket case. I was passing out. I made it. At \$250 a week, I was in euphoria. Wow! Rolling in dough.”

Since 1977, she has been a Columbia recording artist and a prodigiously gifted concert performer, blessed with the rare ability to take Neil Sedaka’s “Solitaire” or Dan Fogelberg’s “Run for the Roses” or a grand old chestnut like “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows” or Donovan’s “Lalena” and make them as personal and deeply moving as her own highly original love songs.

“A lot of the music that comes to me, I change,” Olivora explains. “I change the lyrics; I change the melodies so that by the time I sing a song, I feel as if I’ve co-written it. The basic thing a song has to have is melody. It has to pass the pluck test. If it can’t pass the pluck test, then I can’t sing it.

“See, I can’t riff. A melody has to be there. And you would be surprised, you’d be shocked to know how many records that you love would never stand up on a stage because they’re full of air. They’re not melodic. They’re all production and drums and guitar fills and riffing fills vocally, but when you sit down and pluck out the melody, it isn’t there.

“Jimmy Webb is a melodic writer. Lionel Richie writes melodies. Paul Simon, no. I’m an avid fan. I think he’s a poet in a very unpoetic time. I named my cat after his “Duncan.” But he doesn’t write melodies. Neil Sedaka, number one, the best. Overlooked because people think he’s too stairway to heavenish, but that man is classically trained. You can pluck his music.

“Listen, I started out with just me and a piano. No fills. No riffs. If the melody wasn’t there, there was nowhere to hide. I have always known the difference between music and air.”